
RESEÑAS DE LIBROS / BOOK REVIEWS

FRANK GRAZIANO: *Cultures of Devotion: Folk Saints of Spanish America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Frank Graziano's study of folk saints examines the common Latin American devotion to unofficial "saints" who have not been recognized and almost certainly never will be recognized by the Vatican. After a long introductory essay that familiarizes readers with the basics of popular Roman Catholicism and gives the author's framework for viewing folk saints, Graziano presents five striking in-depth studies, three from Argentina and one each from Peru and Mexico. Saints, devotees, and devotional practices vary greatly throughout the region, which is not surprising since there is, of course, no hierarchical regulation or standardization of these sites; however, the detailed description of each saint ultimately paints a revealing picture of this integral aspect of religion as it is lived in contemporary Latin America.

Some folk saints have proved so appealing that their remains are enshrined in large complexes that attract streams of visitors and serve as important stimuli to local economies. Other saints have small circles of devotees that shrink over the years. Much depends on the men and women who act as the custodians of the shrines where the saints are worshipped, petitioned, and consulted. "Those who are most successful, often middleage or older women," says Graziano, "have personable characters with varying degrees of strength, pride, willfulness, charity, compassion, and charisma" (p. 241). Peru's Niño Compadrito, for example, enjoyed growing influence and popularity during the 1960s under the guidance of a charismatic and compassionate custodian named María Belén, but has lost adherents recently due to its new custodian's "cautious, introverted, protective, and at times unaccommodating" character (p. 248).

A surprising aspect of folk saints is that many of them are not obviously attractive in their present incarnations as statues, portraits, or bones. The Niño Compadrito, for instance, greets pilgrims as a skull to which hair and glass eyes have been added, wearing a crown, ornate robe, and necklaces. In La Rioja, Argentina, in 1967, the desiccated face of Miguelito, an infant who died in 1967, stares at visitors from a glass case. In comparison to these gruesome sights, San La Muerte of northeastern Argentina, who appears most often as a skeleton carved out of wood, seems positively charming. Although Graziano admits his

own discomfiture with some of these images, he contends that they usually fit well with “the visual culture of religious life” in their locales (p. 233).

Another surprising aspect of these saints is their lack of obvious holiness. In life, these saints were usually not moral paragons; after death, their appeal has little to do with moral sanctity. In contrast to official saints, the folk versions attract devotees through the tragedy of their lives, especially the tragedy of their deaths. If there is any virtue commonly espoused, it is a sort of muted political resistance. Rape victim Sarita Colonia of Lima consequently is celebrated more as “the victim of a tragic life” than as “an exemplar of heroic virtue” (p. 150). Argentina’s Gaucho Gil, an unfairly executed soldier, has become a symbol not merely of martyrdom but also of redeeming sacrifice.

The Roman Catholic clergy and hierarchy can play a decisive role in the survival and popularity of folk saints. The Niño Compadrito, for instance, was almost destroyed by a hostile bishop, while Gaucho Gil received a major boost when a priest who was inspired by the Vatican II accepted the validity of devotion to the cowboy saint. Often the local priest’s role is ambiguous. Some will say mass at the celebration of a saint, yet denounce him in the homily. Even the sympathetic priest mentioned above hoped to channel devotion away from Gaucho Gil and into more orthodox practices and beliefs.

Graziano has done an excellent job describing the complexities, contradictions, and human dramas associated with devotion to folk saints in Latin America. This project clearly had an impact on the author, who describes himself as someone who has “little religious belief in anything” but who finds devotion to folk saints “of the highest cultural value” because it is “a unique entry into the logic and cosmovision” of Latin American life (p. ix). The warmth and respect with which he treats these religious devotions even as he outlines their obvious irrationality is the great strength of this book. Graziano, like the devotees he is studying, understands the desire to believe.

Todd Hartch

Eastern Kentucky University

BETTINA NG’WENO: *Turf Wars: Territory and Citizenship in the Contemporary State*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007.

Turf Wars is an elegantly written and richly ethnographic look at the intersection of state formation, race, and minority ethnic status in Colombia, focusing on Afrodescendant communities in the southwestern highlands of Cauca, a region better known in the academic literature for its indigenous activism than for its Black communities. Bettina Ng’weno provides a textured ethnography about